

Message Text

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PAGE 01 PANAMA 02128 010400Z

ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SAB-02 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, PN

SUBJECT: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY CAMPAIGN - BEGINNING TO SWING

REF: A. PANAMA 1425 B. PANAMA 1426 C. PANAMA 1609

D. PANAMA 0411

SUMMARY: POLITICAL PARTIES HAVE EFFECTIVELY BEEN EXCLUDED FROM--OR OPTED OUT OF--ELECTIONEERING FOR PANAMA'S NATIONAL ASSEMBLY. THE CAMPAIGN IS GETTING INTO FULL SWING REGARDLESS, WITH ALMOST ALL THE TRAPPINGS. THE CANAL TREATIES ARE NOT AT ISSUES IN THE CAMPAIGN -- AT LEAST NOT YET. END SUMMARY.

1. PANAMA'S SECOND ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN UNDZR THE TORRRIJOS GOVERNMENT IS GETTING UNDERWAY. ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD AUGUST 6 TO CHOOSE THE NATION'S COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES. THOSE ELECTED WILL SERVE SIX YEARS ON THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES (NACR). THIS 505-MEMBER BODY HAS FEW RESPONSIBILITIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL BUT IT ELECTS PANAMA'S PRESIDENT AND VICE-PRESIDENT. THE CONSENSUS HERE IS THAT THE ASSEMBLY WILL CHOOSE WHOMEVER

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PAGE 02 PANAMA 02128 010400Z

GEN. TORRIJOS SELECTS. AT THE LOCAL LEVEL, UNDER THE TUTELAGE OF THE NATIONAL GUARD AND OTHER NATIONAL LEADERS, THE REPRESENTATIVES HAVE REAL POWER AND INFLUENCE.

2. COMPARED TO THE FIRST NACR ELECTIONS IN 1972, THERE SEEMS TO BE MUCH GREATER INTEREST AND PARTICIPATION

IN THE CURRENT CAMPAIGN. IN 1972, THE ELECTIONS WERE SIMPLY NOT TAKEN VERY SERIOUSLY. TORRIJOS WAS MORE POPULAR THAN HE IS NOW, AND PEOPLE WERE WILLING TO LET THE GOVERNMENT AND ITS ACOLYTES GO THEIR MERRY WAY. TODAY, NOW THAT IT HAS BECOME EVIDENT THAT COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES HAVE SIGNIFICANT ROLES TO PLAY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL, HUNDREDS OF "PRE-CANDIDATES" ARE BUSY COLLECTING THE SIGNATURES OF SUPPORTERS NOMINATING THEM AS CANDIDATES. MANY OF THESE WILL EVENTUALLY BE ELIMINATED FROM THE RUNNING, AS ONLY FIVE CANDIDATES PER DISTRICT ARE ALLOWED ON THE FINAL BALLOT, BUT SOME DISTRICTS HAVE 20 OR MORE HOPEFULS AT THIS EARLY STAGE. MANY INCUMBENTS ARE RUNNING FOR RE-ELECTION.

2. MOVING PACE WITH THE CAMPAIGN HAVE BEEN COMPLAINTS AND PROTESTS OF CAMPAIGN FRAUD AND VIOLATION OF ELECTORAL REGULATIONS. AS ONE COMMENTATOR HAS NOTED, DUBIOUS CAMPAIGN PRACTICES ARE EVIDENTLY NOT THE EXCLUSIVE DOMAIN OF POLITICAL PARTIES. EVEN WITHOUT "INTERMEDIARIEY," AS TORRIJOS TERMS THE PARTIES (REF C), THERE ARE CHARGES OF THREATS, BRIBERY, FALSE PROMISES, AND MISUSE OF POWER. MANY SUCH CHARGES HAVE BEEN TOO VAGUE TO BE INVESTIGATED, BUT THE ELECTORAL TRIBUNAL IS BEGINNING TO RUN CHECKS ON NOMINATING SIGNATURES, TO ENSURE THAT REGISTRATION OF SUPPORTERS IS ON THE UP-AND-UP.

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PAGE 03 PANAMA 02128 010400Z

3. AS REPORTED REF B, THE ELECTORAL LEGISLATION DOES NOT PROVIDE FOR POLITICAL PARTY PARTICIPATION. DESPITE ROMULO ESCOBAR'S PLEDGE OF LAST JANUARY (REF D) TO THE EFFECT THAT "ALL PANAMANIAN WILL PARTICIPATE IN THE NEXT ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN WITHOUT RESTRICTIONS OF ANY KIND AND IN ABSOLUTE FREEDOM OF ACTION AND THOUGHT," THE PARTIES ARE NOT PUSHING THE GOVERNMENT ON THIS. THEY SEEM, IN EFFECT, TO HAVE OPTED OUT, AND FOR SEVERAL REASONS: THEY SEE THE ASSEMBLY, OVERSHADOWED BY GEN. TORRIJOS, AS A FARCE AT BEST; THEY HESITATE TO ACT WITHOUT LEGAL SANCTION AND PROTECTION; AND THEY WANT TO AVOID LENDING AN AIR OF LEGITIMACY TO THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT. FURTHERMORE, THE CUMBERSOME SYSTEM OF 505 CONSTITUENCIES--SOME TIME--REQUIRES TREMENDOUS HARD WORK AT THE GRASS-ROOTS LEVEL. AND THE PARTIES APPARENTLY LACK BOTH THE ENERGY AND THE ORGANIZATION TO MAKE A DZCENT SHOWING WITHOUT THE BZNEFIT OF THE LARGE SUMS OF MONEY WHICH LEGALITY WOULD MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR THEM TO RAISE. NEVERTHELESS, SOME PARTY MEMBERS, INCLUDING THREE LEADERS OF THE SMALLH BUT RESPECTED CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY, ARE CAMPAIGNING AS INDIVIDUALS.

SOME MEMBERS OF OR SYMPATHIZERS WITH THE PANAMENISTA PARTY OF EXILED PRESIDENT ARNULFO ARIAS ARE ALSO REPORTEDLY IN THE RUNNING.

4. IT WOULD BE PREMATURE TO PREDICT HOW THE CAMPAIGN WILL EVENTUALLY SHAPE UP. MANY OF THE USUAL POLITICAL TRAPPING ARE IN EVIDENCE--POSTERS, NEWSPAPER ADS, FLYERS. BUT SOMETHING IS DEFINITELY MISSING: ISSUES. AT THIS EARLY HAZARDING-OUT STAGE, CAMPAIGN TALK CENTERS ON PERSONALITY AND REPUTATION. WITH NACR AUTHORITY AND RESPONSIBILITY PRACTICALLY NONEXISTENT AND WITHOUT A POLITICAL PARTY STRUCTURE, IT MAY BE THAT NO REAL ISSUES WILL EMERGE. THE CAMPAIGN, SUCH AS IT IS, MAY WILL CENTER INSTEAD ON PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES, ON LOCAL LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 04 PANAMA 02128 010400Z

"BREAD-AND-BUTTER" ISSUES, AND ON WHO KNOWS HOW TO SHAKE AND MOVE THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE. THE PANAMA CANAL TREATIES ARE NOT INVOLVED IN THE CAMPAIGN AT THIS POINT. BUT, DEPENDING ON WHERE THE ISSUE STANDS WHEN THE CAMPAIGN REALLY HEATS UP IN LATE MAY OR JUNE, THE CHANCE OF THE TREATIES BECOMING CAUGHT UP IN THE ELECTIONS CANNOT BE RULED OUT.

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